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## After a night of clashes, Turkish president asserts that military coup has been defeated

Roy Gutman, Glen Johnson and Laura King

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The Turkish capital was rocked by violent clashes overnight as the government fought back against a military coup, but authorities said Saturday they had managed to stave off a rebellion that has plunged one of America's most important NATO allies into chaos.

"They have pointed the people's guns against the people," Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared Saturday morning, after a night of bomb blasts, gunfire and air battles between rival aircraft of the Turkish military rattled the capital of Ankara.

"This government brought to power by the people is in charge," the president said after returning to Istanbul. "They won't succeed as long as we stand against them by risking everything."

At least 60 people, "mostly civilians," were killed in attacks in Ankara, a government spokesman said. The state-run Anadolu news agency said 754 members of the armed forces had been arrested.

The coup attempt began late Friday, when a statement from the military was issued saying it had seized control "to reinstall the constitutional order, democracy, human rights and freedoms."

Erdogan called on supporters to take to the streets to defend his rule, and by Saturday morning, Turkish television was broadcasting images of rebel soldiers surrendering.

Still, the president had been unable to return to Ankara on Friday from the seaside resort where he was vacationing because rebels controlled the airspace around the capital.

While the government appeared to be consolidating control in Istanbul, the situation remained more uncertain in the capital.

The chaos enveloping a country that is a NATO ally, regarded as pivotal in the fight against Islamic State militants, boded ill for a region already roiled by violence. Both NATO and the U.S. administration were watching late-night and early morning developments with something close to alarm.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry said in a statement that the Obama administration viewed the situation "with gravest concern," and said he had spoken with his Turkish counterpart and voiced U.S. support for the elected Turkish government. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, calling Turkey a valued member of the alliance, called for "calm and restraint, and full respect for Turkey's democratic institutions and its constitution."

Both the Bosphorus Bridge and Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge in Istanbul were closed to traffic on Friday, blocked by tanks, and gunfire erupted at one point when citizens protesting the coup attempted to cross.

In Ankara, a bomb exploded at the parliament building, the Anadolu agency reported, and Erdogan said rebel bombs targeted the seaside resort hotel where he was thought to be vacationing.

Diego Cupolo, an Italian American photographer living in Ankara, described the scene there Saturday as, “massive, massive death. Everybody is stressed. There’s a lot of broken glass and people are scared.”

He said jets had been circling the city and dropping bombs. Overnight, he said, “I heard people coming around with megaphones calling people into the streets: ‘Come support your country!’ It was an organized effort to support Erdogan.”

A local imam could be heard praying all night, he said.

Recent months have been filled with turmoil across Turkey. Violence from Syria’s multi-sided war has increasingly spilled across the Turkish border, with the government blaming Islamic State for a deadly attack last month on the main international airport in Istanbul.

Turkey was also at the center of a migrant crisis that boiled over last summer when thousands of refugees used it as a springboard for the short crossing to Greece, although measures by the European Union have since stemmed that flood.



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As the only majority-Muslim member of NATO, Turkey has lent its soil to U.S. air bases, supported American military operations...

(Tracy Wilkinson and W.J. Hennigan)

In a fast-developing and turbulent series of events, tanks and soldiers blocked the entry to the main Istanbul airport, and incoming flights were turned away as outgoing air traffic also halted.

Ankara appeared to be the epicenter of the uprising, with repeated explosions hitting outside the parliament building and gunfire ringing out. After midnight, two fighter jets ripped low through the sky, their afterburners creating a deafening racket.

A statement attributed to the powerful military declared that the army had seized control in order to “ensure that the rule of law once again reigns in the country.”

The military has been a traditional bastion of secularism, while Erdogan, initially considered politically moderate, has taken an increasingly strident Islamist stance since his rise to power in 2002.

Prime Minister Binali Yildirim denied that what he called limited elements of the military had succeeded in wresting control from the government.



Speaking to Turkey’s private NTV television, he characterized events as a coup “attempt” by “certain groups who took arms entrusted to them by the state and pointed them toward the state.”

In Ankara, hundreds of bearded men – backers of Erdogan – walked along a main boulevard toward the prime minister’s office, waving Turkish flags and chanting, “God is great!” One marcher called the situation a “mini-war,” and another denounced the attempted overthrow.

“The people are resisting,” said the man, who gave his name as Adnan.

But opponents of the Turkish leader were out on the street as well. One man who identified himself as Engin Zengin used an obscenity to describe the Islamist-leaning president. “He wanted to make Turkey like Iran, to make us all Islamic fundamentalists,” he said.



Prime Minister Erdogan blames the reclusive Islamic preacher in exile, leader of Hizmet, for the bitter political power struggle playing out in his homeland. (Timothy M. Phelps)

The turmoil was reminiscent of coups that rattled Turkey from the 1960s to the 1990s, but Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, had managed to instill a sense of stability in recent years. Human rights groups and Western governments, though, have expressed deepening concern about a continuing erosion of rights and harsh measures by Erdogan to muzzle dissent, stifle the media and bolster his personal power.

The Turkish leader has also launched a punishing war on Kurdish separatists, deeming them a far more dangerous threat than the jihadists of Islamic State.

It was several hours before the president was able to take to the airwaves to denounce the attempt by what he called a "minority" of the Turkish military to take power. For a man who up until now controlled most of the country's news media, he was reduced to communicating with CNN Turk, a television channel he considers to be an opponent, over Facetime.

"They will pay the price, the highest cost at the end," Erdogan vowed.

The U.S. Embassy in Turkey sent out an alert warning all American citizens to "shelter in place" in light of the reports of violence.

A visiting California academic in Istanbul, David Selim Sayers, reported he had seen stores shuttering their doors, people rushing for their cars, and long lines of people outside corner stores and ATMs. In a dorm at Bosphorus University, where Sayers is a guest lecturer, he said there was a rush on a vending machine selling Oreo cookies.

"We don't know how it's going to go," said Sayers, who teaches at San Francisco State University, "but people are preparing for the worst."

A military faction calling itself the "Peace at Home Council" appeared to be spearheading the uprising. The group accused the president of destroying constitutional order and undermining the

secular democratic state. The group's name evokes a phrase used by Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's founding father.

Erdogan blamed the uprising on Fethullah Gulen, a retired Islamic cleric and former political ally, who once had a sizable following in the Turkish police, judiciary and military.

The president has purged the police and judiciary of reputed Gulen sympathizers over the last two years, and had been due to hold a meeting of the body overseeing the military, the High Military Council. There were reports he was planning oust anyone still linked with Gulen.

Gulen, whose movement denied any involvement, now lives in exile in Pennsylvania, and Erdogan has tried, thus far unsuccessfully, to obtain his extradition to face allegations of supporting terrorism.

By Saturday morning, it appeared that Erdogan's government was consolidating control, but Cupolo, the photographer living in Ankara, was not convinced. He wasn't venturing outside yet.

"We'll just have to see in the next few hours and days," he said. "This could go any way.... Whatever happens is probably going to change the trajectory of this country."